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Great Lakes Restoration

A unified, multistate authority, plus more funds, can make lakes healthier

July 20, 2003

You could call it Everglades envy. Ever since Florida got billions of dollars to restore its impressive natural water system, folks around the Great Lakes have been asking, why not us?

Now U.S. senators and representatives from around the lakes have banded together to push exactly that idea. Last week, they introduced bills in both the House and Senate to create the Great Lakes Restoration Fund, with hundreds of millions of dollars in annual spending and a new level of coordination for all the work, big and small, that the lakes need to remain truly great.

The Senate bill calls for \$6 billion over 10 years, the House bill for \$4 billion over 5 years. Even those substantial numbers wouldn't address all the problems; by one estimate \$7.4 billion is needed just to clean up the top 31 toxic hot spots on the U.S. side of the lakes.

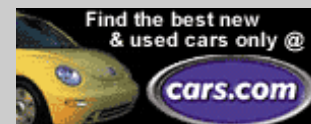
The legacy of dangerous chemicals in the sediment is far from the only problem. New ones keep coming. They include invasive species such as the zebra mussel and goby, and there are those that we of the Great Lakes inflict on ourselves by not properly planning or maintaining sewerage systems. The ongoing need to preserve and restore wetlands ranks high on the list, and water diversion or extraction issues are always looming.

The coordination problem is almost as knotty. The Great Lakes suffer because so many governments and agencies, councils and commissions are involved in their use and management -- and no one can hold any of the others accountable. The bills call for a new umbrella organization led by the Great Lakes governors, with broad membership from other groups, to have that final authority.

U.S. Sen. Mike DeWine, R-Ohio, is the lead Senate sponsor, with Democrats Carl Levin and Debbie Stabenow of Michigan among cosponsors. In the U.S. House, Rep. Rahm Emanuel, D-Chicago, has taken the lead; Michigan cosponsors are U.S. Reps. Vern Ehlers, R-Grand Rapids; Pete Hoekstra, R-Holland; Sander Levin, D-Royal Oak; and Bart Stupak, D-Menominee.

The needs of the lakes are huge. Cash-strapped agencies can't even do the monitoring needed to make proper decisions, let alone undertake real projects. The senators and representatives who have stepped forward on behalf of the lakes will have to push very hard to realize this vision, and everyone in the Great Lakes basin needs to encourage them.

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